

Planning Review Proposal

Presented by the National Council for Metal Detecting (NCMD)

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Overview

The history of the UK is written in the soil, with items known as ‘Portable Antiquities’ (coins and artefacts) contained in the topsoil and fixed antiquities such as walls, post holes etc, contained in the subsoil.

The topsoil is typically plough soil, as much of the land in the UK has been churned by ploughing at some point over the past 200 years, and any of the contextual information so important to archaeologists, is lost.

Typical depth of plough soil is around 10 to 12 inches, but deep ploughing can take that to 18”. As this soil has no context, it is typically removed by archaeologists before they start excavating the sub soil.

It is this plough soil that contains the evidence of our ancestors existence, the items they used in their day-to-day lives such as coins, brooches, buckles and metal tools and these items are being found and recorded onto the national database by detectorists across the UK.

Many thousands of items that come under the Treasure Act of 1996 and the revision of 2023, are also found in the plough soil and many of these important and sometimes nationally significant items, are in museums across the country including the British Museum.

However, much of the land in the UK that is being built on or covered in wind and solar farms and much of the land being buried under concrete has never been detected, as a result, a huge number of historic artefacts and significant treasure items have been lost forever.

This is our shared national history, it belongs to us all and it is unfortunate that this has been allowed to happen, however it will be a national disgrace if this is allowed to continue.

We at the National Council for Metal Detecting feel strongly that this needs to change and with over 42,000 members, we have the manpower to change this going forward.

We have also developed the technology to be able to provide a fully managed solution and nil cost to developers or landowners and with no time delays to the current process.

Portable antiquities are our shared national heritage and need to be protected. The best way to do this is for detectorists to recover them, record them with the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) who share the information on the nation database for the benefit of the nation as a whole.

Current Planning Process

Archaeology is a key part of the current planning process, local planning authorities assess applications on the impact to potential archaeology on the site.

This is typically carried out by desk-based assessments to check for any impact to recorded history on the site, and can be supplemented with a field assessment, where geophysics or test pits can be used to identify the presence and significance of remains.

Some archaeology companies run a detector over the spoil heaps of test pits, but that merely scans a tiny percentage of the overall area of the site.

Downside of Current Process

One key drawback to this current process, is that it's a snapshot of the fixed archaeology that is potentially in the subsoil, but it excludes the portable antiquities that could potentially be in the plough soil across the whole site, and some of these items could potentially be treasure items or items of national significance.

Some councils mention a metal detecting survey, but from our enquiries it seems that at best, it's someone with a detector scanning the spoil heaps and the area immediately around the trenches, which is wholly inadequate. It would require at least 2 people per acre to carry out a thorough metal detecting survey.

Furthermore, there are NO finds recorded on the national database by archaeology companies, and very few treasure items are reported. This is in contrast to the 1.8 million finds recorded primarily by metal detectorists, as well as the many thousands of treasure items that detectorists have put through the system since the Treasure Act was launched 1996.

The findspot of portable antiquities is as important as the item itself and once construction commences, both the findspot information and the artefact itself is lost forever and this is a situation that needs to be urgently rectified.



Solution

A full metal detecting survey of the site, managed through the NCMD, utilising our members across the UK and managed by the technology we already have in place.

1. The NCMD has currently (March 2026) 42,000 members across the UK who are fully insured as part of their membership.
2. The metal detecting survey would be carried out quickly and can be completed over the course of a weekend.
3. There will be no time delay to the current process.
4. There is no cost to the developer, landowner, or the archaeology company carrying out the assessment of the site.
5. The NCMD has specially designed a Mobile App that is currently available to all members and is used extensively. All relevant finds are photographed in the field and a precise find spot is recorded on the app.
6. A digital report will be generated by the NCMD of finds and findspots, a copy of which will be given to the landowner, the archaeology company and/or the County Archaeologist.
7. All finds in the UK are governed by law and the landowner will have the same right to finds and Treasure items as is currently the case. This is confirmed in the NCMD written agreement which is extensively in use now.
8. All relevant parties will know in advance if there has been any special activity on that site from the items found during the survey, even before the test pits are dug or an office based survey is started.
9. This detecting survey will help determine if and where any test pits or geophysics might be required, or not as the case may be.
10. All finds data, including possible treasure will be shared with the local Finds Liaison Officer with the find spot data to be recorded on the PAS database as normal.
11. Far more of our heritage will be saved as all the possible topsoil across the site will be detected before it is bulldozed aside and findspots destroyed.
12. Virtually 99% of all digging would be in the topsoil, which has already been mechanically ploughed for over 200 years.
13. Any Hoards or items of Significance that require excavation by a qualified archaeologist will be paid for from the NCMD's excavation fund, up to £500 per item.



Conclusion

- A correctly organised metal detecting survey of the fields where planning permission has been sought can be implemented before archaeologists begin their searches via desktop or in the field and will help direct them to any hotspots denoted by a concentration of finds.
- The NCMD can manage this process using our sophisticated member database and extensive network of clubs and groups of detectorists across the UK.
- Each site will be managed by an experienced detecting event organiser, who will be fully insured by the NCMD.
- The digital information of any archaeological finds uncovered during the survey is made available to all relevant parties, with all relevant find spots marked within a square meter using the NCMD app.
- This simple solution is ready and could be deployed within a short space of time.
- The fully insured army of detectorists and our highly accurate digital recording system is available now at no cost or time delay to anyone involved in the current process.
- **And most importantly of all, no more of our shared National Heritage will be destroyed by construction projects or solar and wind farms, instead it'll be recorded on the national database or preserved in museums.**

One example of many we could quote, came from a museum curator who told me that a digger driver for a small developer had uncovered a pot of gold coins. He poured the coins into a builders bucket and that night, was in the pub sharing the coins amongst his friends. Someone saw this and reported it to the museum, who contacted the construction company and some of the coins were retrieved.

The curator concluded that had this scheme been in place, that pot of gold coins would have been found, excavated correctly and would have found it's rightful place in a local museum.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further.

For and on behalf of the NCMD

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